DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 173 854 CS 205 015

AUTHOR Vanden Bergh, Bruce G.; Reid, Leonard N.
TITLE A Model for Measuring Puffery Effects.
PUB DATE Aug 79
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism (62nd, Houston, Texas, August 5-8, 1979)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Communication (Thought Transfer); *Consumer Protection; Information Dissemination; Legal Problems; *Organizational Communication; Research; *Research Methodology
IDENTIFIERS *Advertising; *Communication Research

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to describe and discuss a conceptual model for experimentally investigating the effects of advertising puffery. The various sections contain a discussion of puffery as a legal concept, a description and discussion of the proposed model, research support for the model, and implications for future research on puffery. (FL)

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A MODEL FOR MEASURING PUFFERY EFFECTS

By

Bruce G. Vanden Bergh, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor
Department of Advertising
Michigan State University
East Lansing, Michigan

Leonard N. Reid, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor
Department of Advertising
Michigan State University
East Lansing, Michigan

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Leonard N. Reid

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Paper presented before the Advertising Division of the Annual Meeting of Association for Education in Journalism, University of Houston, August 1979.

CS205015

A MODEL FOR MEASURING PUFFERY EFFECTS

The purpose of this article is to describe and discuss a conceptual model for experimentally investigating the effects of advertising puffery. Puffery as a legal concept is discussed in the first section. Next, the proposed model is described and discussed. The third section provides research support for the model. The final section includes a summary and implications for future research on puffery.

PUFFERY - A LEGAL CONCEPT

The major obstacle to experimental study of puffery is that it is a legal and not an empirical or theoretical concept. The legal stance regarding puffery has evolved from legal precedents and expert testimony and not from empirical evidence. Legally puffery is permitted on the grounds that such claims are perceived as sellers' opinions and not as factual statements. The law assumes that reasonable consumers automatically discount puffery claims, and therefore, are not deceived. There are critics though who feel consumers do rely on puffery claims as facts, are deceived by such claims, and that the "puffery exemption" remains the last remnant of the caveat emptor tradition.

Ivan Preston, among the more vociferous critics of puffery, has argued that puffery affects consumers by burdening them with deceptive statements and has actively pushed for the legal prohibition of all puffery claims (13, 14, 15). Eli Cox feels that puffery not only deceives consumers, but has negative long-term consequences on the very effectiveness of advertising itself (8). John Howard and James Hulbert, in their summary of testimony given before the FTC's 1971 hearings on advertising, concluded that exaggerations and overstatements in messages have contributed to an artificial rise in consumer expectations

and have recommended that the same legal requirements be applied to puffery claims as applied to other claims (10). Most practitioners, on the other hand, have defended puffery by arguing that such claims are a necessary part of advertising and that consumers understand this and respond accordingly.

The problem remains that, while the controversy over puffery has grown, there have been no published experimental investigations of the actual effects of puffery. This is most likely because puffery is a legal concept that does not readily lend itself to empirical definition or operationalization, and therefore, is difficult to manipulate and measure.

PUFFERY - A CONCEPTUAL MODEL

Support for the proposed model for the experimental study of the effects of puffery comes from studies reported in the psychology and marketing literature on the causal link between the overstatement and understatement of information and the manipulation of expectations (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 12, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 23, 25). While these studies have focused heavily on product evaluation as the major dependent variable, they suggest that advertising is an important source of consumer expectations. This suggestion provides the foundation for the following conceptual model of puffery effects as illustrated in Figure 1.

On the surface, the problem of measuring puffery might appear to be the simple assessment of the effects of puffed claims on buying behavior and attitudes toward the advertiser and messages making those claims. A closer look at the problem, however, uncovers some intermediate processes and factors which suggest a novel approach to the investigation of puffery effects. These processes and factors are illustrated in Figure 1, and when viewed as a whole provide a hierarchical model of how the use of puffery might affect how advertising is received and used by consumers.

The first intermediate factor of importance to the understanding of puffery is the role of consumer expectations. An expectation can be defined as a mental or emotion state in which an individual looks forward to the probable occurrence or appearance of something (9, 11). In the case of advertising, the expectations created are usually for a certain degree of product quality or level of product performance. When the product quality or performance a consumer expects has been artificially raised by puffery, concern turns to a second factor--whether or not the product purchased fulfills these expectations.

The confirmation or disconfirmation of expectations are important intermediate processes to the understanding of puffery. Confirmation occurs when a consumer feels a product has met his/her expectations. Disconfirmation occurs when the product has failed to meet expectations. This can occur in one of two ways. The product can fall short of expectations or it can exceed the expectations. If it falls short, a negative disconfirmation should occur. If it exceeds expectations, a positive disconfirmation should occur. In the model in Figure 1, puffery might be expected to lead to a negative disconfirmation of expectations. Understating product claims, on the other hand, might be expected to do the opposite--lead to a positive disconfirmation of expectations.

Taking the model in Figure 1 to its logical conclusion, the process described might be expected to result in negative consumer feelings toward advertising which uses puffery as well as the sponsor, a loss of message credibility, no or little intent to repurchase the product, and additional support for a general feeling of suspect toward all advertising messages.

Figure 1 provides a model for an empirically useful understanding of the term puffery. It does this by making the effects of puffery testable and measurable in terms of the intermediate factors and processes in the model. This has not been possible with the standard legal interpretations of puffery.

In terms of the model in Figure 1, a puffed claim can be defined as any claim which creates artificially high expectations for product quality or performance. A simple comparison of the expectations created by an advertisement with consumer assessment of the actual product can help determine if an ad has overstated the product's qualities. This technique can also be used to pretest and select advertisements to be used in experimentation on puffery (21).

RESEARCH SUPPORT

Results generated in an experiment reported in detail in other papers by Vanden Bergh and Reid (21, 22) support the model in Figure 1 and will be summarized here. A comparative treatments laboratory experiment was executed to test the relative effects of advertising puffery, as depicted in Figure 1, against the effects of realistic and understated advertising messages. The experiment was executed and data gathered from 81 students attending summer session classes at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville.

The major independent variable manipulated in the experiment was the discrepancy between a product as depicted in treatment advertisements and subject experience with the actual product. Thus, the advertising message puffing the product would be expected to create a rather definite discrepancy between the depicted product and the one subjects experienced in the experiment. The realistic ad was predicted to produce very little discrepancy and the understated ad was predicted to produce a discrepancy in the opposite direction to that generated by the puffed message. Once the discrepancies were created, effects were observed on the following dependent variables: (1) The confirmation or disconfirmation of expectations, (2) change in subject attitudes toward the messages, (3) change in subject attitudes toward the sponsoring company, (4) change in message credibility, and (5) change in intent to purchase the advertised product.

It was predicted that the puffed advertising message would create a definite discrepancy between the product depicted and the actual product which would lead to a negative effect on the variables described relative to the other treatment ads. To test this hypothesis, subjects were randomly assigned to each of three treatment groups. One group received a puffed newspaper advertisement, one a realistic newspaper ad, and one an understated newspaper ad for a ballpoint pen. After exposure to the treatment ads, each subject rated the pen depicted in the ad on a product rating scale. Subjects also evaluated the message and sponsoring company, rated the message's credibility, and indicated intent to purchase the pen.

After these procedures, all subjects were given a pen comparable in value to the one depicted in the realistic newspaper ad. Subjects were given a chance to inspect and use the pen. They were then asked if the pen was much better, better, about the same, worse, or much worse than the pen depicted in the newspaper ad. The product rating scale was administered again at this point in the experiment. Next, subjects were exposed to the treatment ads again and the message and company evaluations, message credibility rating, and intent to purchase measure repeated. Measures taken before exposure to the pen were subtracted from those taken afterward to generate change scores for each treatment group.

All data were subjected to analysis of variance procedures and appropriate statistical probes used to tease out pairwise differences between groups. The findings of this study have been simplified and summarized in Table 1. The results reported support the conceptual model illustrated in Figure 1. Relative to the other treatment groups, the puffed message produced aritficially high consumer expectations for the product depicted in the ad which led to a preponderance of negative disconfirmations of expectations as well as a negative

change in: (1) consumer attitudes toward the message and sponsoring company, (2) message credibility, and (3) intent to purchase the product.

SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

The model and study reported provide a way to test the relative effects of advertising puffery based on the expectations it creates and not on moral, legal, ethical or stylistic interpretations of what is puffery and what is not. Thus, any manipulation of symbols, words, art, photography, music, video, audio, sound effects, etc., which suggests to an individual that the product depicted is substantially better in value than it actually is can be considered puffery when it is done within the bounds of the law. Such an interpretation allows us to test for puffery by comparing consumer expectations for a product advertised with the actual product.

Hopefully, using this or similar new conceptualizations of puffery, a research-based understanding of advertising puffery will emerge. In the future, research in this area should attempt to test the long-term effects of puffery as well as the short-tun effects reported here. Also, the use of puffery for different types of products, in different media, and against different population segments should be studied. Entire multimedia campaigns employing puffery should be investigated for a possible synergistic effect that might actually further inflate expectations for a product. Also the effects of puffery should be tested in real-life settings. The line of investigation is now open to future improvements to help advertisers, lawyers, government agencies, consumers and students better understand the effects and effectiveness of advertising puffery.

Figure 1

A HIERARCHICAL MODEL OF POSSIBLE EFFECTS

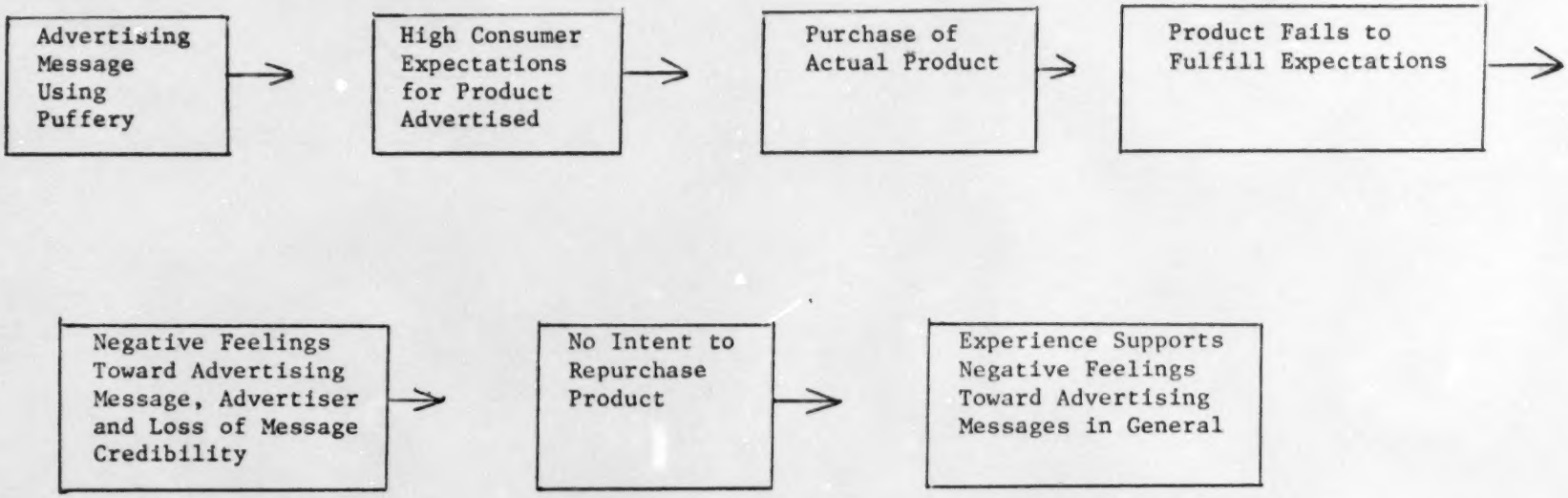
Advertising Message Using Puffery
High Consumer Expectations for Product Advertised
Purchase of Actual Product
Product Fails to Fulfill Expectations
Negative Feelings Toward Advertising Message, Advertiser and Loss of Message Credibility
No Intent to Repurchase Product
Experience Supports Negative Feelings Toward Advertising Messages in General

Table 1

RELATIVE EFFECTS OF PUFFERY

	Treatment Groups		
	Puffed Message	Realistic Message	Understated Message
Expectations	High	Realistic	Low
Confirmation/ Disconfirmation	Negative Disconfirmation	Confirmation and Negative Disconfirmation	Positive Disconfirmation
Change in Message Evaluation	Negative	Slightly Negative	Positive
Change in Sponsor Evaluation	Negative	Slightly Negative	Positive
Change in Message Credibility	Negative	Slightly Negative	Positive
Change in Intent to Purchase	Negative	Slightly Negative	Positive

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